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ABSTRACT

"Audience experience" is a term used to denote the subjective meaning of news watching for the average American. This study examines audience experience in the following ways: the extent to which the television audience chooses, through self-defined goals, the television news broadcast they will watch, the uses and gratification associated with television news, and the implications of this data for broadcast journalism. From tape recorded group discussions with 24 television viewers, a questionnaire was devised which included, along with other measures, an inventory of colloquially worded statements regarding audience experience with television news. The questionnaire was administered to 240 adults chosen from 40 randomly selected housing clusters. Results indicated that for at least one-half of the sample, viewing was accidental rather than deliberate; viewers tended to watch the news to keep informed about subjective interests and found the news content and format reassuring; and although a large percentage of the audience regarded the news as entertainment, over one-half of the viewers surveyed indicated dissatisfaction with the depth of news coverage. Tables of data are included. (MAI)

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# *The Audience Experience With Television News*



(Prior Publication)

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EACH WEEKDAY evening, tens of millions of Americans watch the news on television. For many in the viewing audience, the socially constructed reality presented by television news is their prime, indeed preferred, source of information about the world in which they live. And yet despite this widespread reliance on TV news, these same broadcast news programs have become the subject of intense public concern. For a decade, the alleged biases of television news have been debated, and its impact on the public assumed.[1]

Recently, and somewhat belatedly, social scientists have begun to study the institutions and processes of broadcast journalism. There is now, for instance, a growing body of scholarship on the formation of broadcast news content, and several studies have charted general patterns of viewer attitudes and television news exposure.[2]

Nevertheless, to date, little research has been directed toward what Lazarsfeld called "the audience experience," that is, the subjective meaning of news-watching for the average American.[3] Why, for example, do people watch TV news? To be informed, or are there other motives? What do viewers expect to gain from their exposure? How does the news audience react to the newscasters, to various program formats and production styles, to the news itself? How important—or unimportant—are newscasts in the daily lives of their audiences?

This monograph attempts to answer these and other questions about the audience experience with television news. In more formal terms, the research reported here has three major focuses. The first examines to what extent people who watch TV news can be considered an "active" audience. As commonly conceptualized, the term "active" implies that, within the constraints of available media content, individuals choose the messages to which they will expose themselves, that their decisions are motivated by goals which are self-defined, and that "active" participation in the communication process limits and conditions the effects of the mass media.[4] As ap-

plied to television news, the concept of the "active" audience predicts that viewers will make an "appointment" in their daily routines, deliberately choosing to watch one or more newscasts, that since the news is useful and gratifying to people who watch it, it becomes valued or "important" to them, and that because the news programs are important to the viewers, they will be attentive to both the form and content of the programs.

The second major focus of this study probes the question of audience "activity" or involvement from a different, but related, perspective, and inquires into the uses and gratifications associated with TV news.[5] The term "uses" refers to individual motivations for media consumption, and may be understood as an "in order to" motive. To put it another way, "uses" are what a person expects to "get" from watching the news. Uses arise both from individual psychological "needs" and location in social structures. By "gratifications" is meant the consequences of media exposure as subjectively reported by members of the audience. Uses may lead an individual to watch the news, what the individual experiences (e.g., information gain; emotional arousal, etc.) are the "gratifications."

Finally, the third section of this monograph draws together the data presented and considers some of the implications of those findings for broadcast journalism. By inquiring into the audience experience, it may be possible to suggest how TV news might better serve the needs and interests of the viewing public.

*Research Design*

This study was conducted in Albany County, New York. While no claim is made that its results can necessarily be generalized beyond the population sampled, it should be noted that by most measures of social characteristics Albany County is quite "averare." The median age in Albany County is 30.8 years, for example, compared to a national median of 28.8; some 55.7 percent of Albany County residents and 55.9 percent of all Americans are high school graduates, the median family income in Albany County in 1970 was $10,697 and in urbanized areas nationwide, $10,196.[6] Moreover, even though the state government is centered there, only 25.1 percent of the county's non-farm work force is employed by some level of government, compared to a nationwide figure of 20.1 percent.

Albany County is part of the forty-third largest television market in the United States,[7] and is served by three commercial television stations, each affiliated with one of the national television networks. At the time of this study, two of the three local TV stations broadcast half-hour news programs each day at 6 and 11 p.m., while the third presented an hour of locally-produced news at 6 and half an hour at 11. Each carried the network evening news immediately following its local early-evening newscast. In addition, there was a public television station, morning and evening newspapers with a combined circulation of 138,000, and a cable-television system with 22,000 subscribers.

Two kinds of data were collected. The first consisted of transcripts of tape-recorded focused group discussions held with 24 people who watched television news nearly every day and who lived in the Albany broadcast market. Focused group participants were recruited by informants known to the investigator. The purpose of the focused group discussions was three-fold. to gain an early sense of what television news-watching might mean to people, to discover items for inclusion in a planned survey, and to obtain data which could be used to enrich and expand our understanding of the survey results.

Although no attempt was made to obtain a cross-section of viewers, the characteristics of the focused group members corresponded generally to the overall population. Slightly more than half were women, for example, and one-third had college experience, compared to a county-wide figure of approximately 25 percent.

Each focus group discussion lasted for at least an hour. Discussions were semi-structured with all participants asked to explain their news program preferences and experiences. Transcripts of the discussions were analyzed for viewer attitudes toward news programming, motivations for regular news viewing and satisfactions and dissatisfactions derived from watching TV news.

From this analysis, a questionnaire was prepared which included, along with other measures, an inventory of colloquially worded statements regarding the audience experience with TV news. The inventory contained 25 uses and gratifications statements previously tested on viewers in Great Britain,[8] as well as 15 new items. All of the propositions reflected viewer sentiments as expressed during the

focused group discussions, and many were based on the actual words of the discussants.

During October and November, 1975, the questionnaire was administered in personal interviews with a sample of 240 adults, chosen from 40 randomly selected housing clusters. Six interviews were conducted in each "cluster." Following Sudman,[9] four quota controls were imposed. Men under 30, men over 30, women who worked outside the home and women who did not work outside the home. In addition, each respondent was screened to insure that he or she watched a minimum of one television news program a week.[10]

Exposure to television news was measured by an index which took into account the frequency with which a given respondent watched local and network newscasts in comparison with all other respondents in the sample.[11] Each respondent was asked how many times during the week he or she watched a local newscast at 6 or 11 p.m. or a network news program. Viewing rates for each possible exposure were cross-tabulated in turn with each of the remaining two news exposure measures. For three types of newscasts, there were three, non-redundant cross-tabulations. After each bivariate distribution was examined an assignment rule was devised reflecting the comparative exposure rates and a value assigned to each cell in each table. All respondents received three scores, depending on location in the tables, and the three scores were then summed for each respondent. Scores on this new measure were trichotomized at naturally occurring cutting points, yielding overall news exposure scores. Some 16.7 percent of respondents fell into a "high" exposure category. More than half (58.3 percent) had "medium" total exposure scores and one-quarter (25.0 percent) were grouped in a "low" total exposure category.

Respondents were asked to indicate their support for the 40 uses and gratifications statements on a five-point scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Their responses were arranged in a correlation matrix and factor analyzed. Initial factors were extracted by principal factoring with iteration followed by oblique rotation (delta = 0) to terminal solution. Oblique rotation was used, first, because there was some evidence from earlier studies that the uses and gratifications dimensions might be intercorrelated[12] and, second, because oblique rotation is generally thought to be empirically more realistic.[13]

*Is the TV News Audience "Active"?*

The audience experience with TV news is often cited as a major example of a mass media audience at its most active.[14] During political campaigns when voters watch TV news to help decide their vote, at times of crisis when individuals turn to TV news in order to meet urgent psychological and social concerns, and in more "normal" times when audience members use the newscasts to satisfy "routine" needs, the TV news audience is assumed to be actively interested in and involved with the newscasts.

The "activity" of the daily TV news audience can be assessed in a number of ways. The first aspect of "activity" to be considered here deals with patterns of audience decision making. How do viewers decide to watch the news in the first place, and by what criteria do they choose between newscasts which are aired at the same time?

To find out whether exposure to the news is "accidental" or whether people actively make an "appointment" in their daily schedules to watch, respondents were asked, "How do you manage to tune in at the right time for the news so that you don't miss the first part of the program?" Responses indicating a deliberate decision to seek exposure (e.g., "I watch the clock." "I am just sitting down to dinner and turn the set on.") were coded as "active." Responses such as "The set is already on" or "I want to see the program that comes on next and just turn the set on early" were classified as "passive."

There was no significant difference between the percentage of "active" and "passive" on this measure, with 53.2 percent of respondents *not* actively deciding to watch the news and 46.8 percent actively choosing to tune in. Three out of every seven (43.8 percent) said their TV sets were already on before the newscasts began, while only one respondent in eight (12.5 percent) said he or she "watched the clock."

Men were more likely than women ($X^2 = 5.78$, $df = 1$, $p$ less than .05) to be "appointment" viewers. Since women make up a disproportionate share of day-time TV viewers,[15] it is speculated that women, especially housewives, already have the TV set on and are thus overrepresented in the "passive" or lead-in audience. Actively deciding to watch the news was not significantly associated with viewer age, but did vary significantly ($X^2 = 6.36$, $df = 2$, $p$ less

than .05) with viewers' education. A majority of respondents (53.1 percent) who had some college or were college graduates actively sought out the news, while fewer than one-third (32.1 percent) of respondents without a high shool diploma were similarly selective. The information needs and interests of college-educated viewers may lead them into more active exposure seeking, while less educated viewers may not share their interest in or involvement with the news and hence are less selective.

Being selective in exposure-seeking was curvilinearly related to how much television news one watched ($X^2 = 15.91$, $df = 2$, $p$ less than .01). Among repondents with either comparatively "high" or "low" levels of exposure, approximately two-thirds were nonselective. By contrast, among viewers with "medium" exposure levels, more than a majority (58.5 percent) were active choosers.

It is possible that some viewers who watch little news may be the most selective viewers of all, actively deciding to exposure themselves only when they believe the news may be useful or gratifying. However, more than two-thirds of respondents with low rates of exposure indicated that when they did happen to see the news, it was largely unplanned and not a selective behavior. The association between non-selectivity and high rates of exposure also reflects audience passivity. Even though an individual may be exposed to a substantial amount of news programming, that exposure is often not sought or planned. Rather exposure occurs because the television set is on and the news is broadcast. In the middle range of exposure, however, a majority of viewers actively decided to watch the news and this implies a more goal-oriented pattern of behavior, exposure sought perhaps as a supplement to other news sources.

Still, on balance, for at least half of the sample, their exposure was not actively chosen and represented a more or less accidental feature of their lives, demanding and receiving no extra involvement.

Albany County viewers were also asked: "Why do you watch (program viewed) rather than (one of other two competing newscasts)?" Their answers showed that there were two distinct types of viewers, those whose newscast choices result from some more or less "active" judgment about the relative merits of competing newscasts, and those whose program decisions reflected no such active criteria.

Overall, "active" reasons slightly outnumbered "passive" ones (Table 1). For all three newscasts, but especially the network and 11 p.m. programs, the most often cited reason centered on judgments of and reactions to the newscasters. Viewers expressed relatively strong likes and dislikes among persons on the anchordesk, and, in the case of local news, among weather and sports reporters. Most viewers had definite opinions regarding the newscasters and their competence, lack of bias, skill in presentation and "friendliness." No more than one respondent in eight said program choice was influenced by the quality of the newscast.

Among people who saw the local news at 6 p.m., "program format" played a relatively major part in choosing a station to watch. Some respondents reacted favorably to program "pacing" (although they did not use that term) and to the "happy talk" banter or "action news" style. Many responses about program format dwelt on a

TABLE 1.

*Respondent Criteria for News Program Choice*

| Reason for Watching | Newscast 6 p.m. % | 11 p.m. % | Network % |
|---|---|---|---|
| *"Active"* | | | |
| News quality | 12.0 | 12.4 | 7.9 |
| Program format | 18.1 | 6.0 | 1.8 |
| Newscasters | 21.3 | 29.1 | 41.8 |
| "Active" sub-total | 51.4 | 47.5 | 51.5 |
| *"Passive"* | | | |
| "Habit" | 8.8 | 4.8 | 2.2 |
| Channel | 24.3 | 31.2 | 27.9 |
| Don't Know | 5.1 | 5.8 | 7.2 |
| "Passive" sub-total | 38.2 | 41.8 | 37.3 |
| *"Miscellaneous"* | 10.4 | 10.7 | 11.2 |
| | (N = 189) | (N = 140) | (N = 125) |

negative judgment about program length, with numerous viewers rejecting one station because they believed its hour long newscast demanded too much of their time and contained too little news.

The single most cited "passive" reason for news program choice was "channel," or more precisely the programs which preceded or followed the newscast. For these viewers, the news program itself was clearly of secondary importance. What mattered was that the station carried a favorite adventure program or talk show. Many viewers in this category explained their choice of newscast by saying it was easier to leave the set tuned to the station they were watching or planned to watch after the news. For them, the newscast represented a kind of "least objectionable" programming, an acceptable way to pass the time but of little interest in its own right.

There were no significant differences among active and passive choosers as to age or, with the exception of the six p.m. local news, as to sex. (At six p.m., men were half-again as likely as women to have made their choice based on active criteria $X^2 = 7.83$, df = 1, $p$ less than .01). Once again, however, active and passive viewers were significantly distinguished by education. At six p.m., for example, more than half (55.0 percent) of respondents with less than a high school education were "passive" viewers, while an overwhelming 85.4 percent of college graduates were "active" members of this audience ($X^2 = 14.72$, df = 1, $p$ less than .01). Similar relationships between education and active viewership were found for the network and 11 p.m. local news audiences.

*The Public's News "Diet"*

For a number of years, a debate has raged over whether the American public relies more heavily on television or newspapers for its news and which news medium the public prefers.[16] This controversy raises a question which is relevant to the investigation of the audience experience with TV news. Do people who watch TV news feel it is a satisfactory way to find out about the world in which they live? Or, to put it another way, how important is TV news in meeting the public's desire to be informed?

Two questions bearing on the place of various news media in the viewer's overall news "diet" were included in the Albany study. Respondents were asked first, "Where do you get most of your news

about national and international events?" and second, "Where do you get most of your news about things that happen in and around Albany?" Respondents were allowed to name multiple sources.

The most dramatic conclusion to be drawn from their answers is that no single news medium predominates in public preference, and, indeed, multiple-channel usage is common. In the case of national and international news, for example, 26.7 percent of the respondents said they relied on television, while only a slightly smaller proportion (22.5 percent) found their national and international news in the daily press. But more respondents, 28.3 percent, said they relied *equally* on television and newspapers for this type of news. The relatively large "other" category in Table 2 includes a small number of people who used either radio newscasts or news magazines, and a larger number who got their national and international news from a combination of sources including television, newspapers and interpersonal communications.

TABLE 2

*Respondent's Source of News by Type of News*

| | Type of News | |
|---|---|---|
| | National-International | Local |
| *News Source* | % | % |
| Television | 26.7 | 19.6 |
| Newspapers | 22.5 | 30.4 |
| TV/Newspapers | 28.3 | 28.7 |
| Other | 22.5 | 21.3 |
| (N = 240) | | |

The largest share of respondents said they depended on newspapers for their local news, while only one in five relied exclusively on TV newscasts (Table 2). Again, a substantial number said they used an equal mix of television and newspapers to find out what was going on locally, while the "other" category was made up mostly of combinations of various mass media and interpersonal channels.

Respondent media preferences for national-international news were cross-tabulated with respondent preferences for local news to

produce a single score indicating which mass media or channels people relied on most often for *all* items in their total news diet.

These scores show that few people (10.4 percent) depended completely on television for their combined international, national and local news, while an additional 8.3 percent relied mostly on TV newscasts. A somewhat greater number, 13.3 percent, said they got most of their news from newspapers and 8.3 percent said they depended mostly on the daily press. A substantial proportion, however, some 29.6 percent, used television and newspapers equally to meet their total news needs, while 31.3 percent relied on other mass media or combinations of mass and interpersonal channels."

These results have an important implication. Since all respondents were initially screened to include only persons who watched TV news, it is clear that very few members of the TV news audience met their entire news requirement through TV news coverage. All but a handful of viewers found it necessary to supplement their television news watching in other channels. TV news may have been an important information source for some people, but it was only one among many which were available and used.

*What It Means to Miss the News*

One way to gauge the importance of television news to its audience is to ask people who watch TV news: "If it happened that you didn't see any TV news program for several weeks, would this bother you a great deal, somewhat or hardly at all?" Respondents divided into roughly three equal groups. the 32.5 percent who said they would miss the news "a great deal" if they did not see it for several weeks, the 35.4 percent who said they would be "somewhat" upset, and the remaining 32.1 percent who would not be upset at all. Taking these as measures of "importance," women were more likely than men to rate the news as important or moderately important ($X^2 = 6.42$, $df = 2$; $p$ less than .05). However, this measure was not significantly associated with respondent age or education.

Respondent attitudes regarding the importance of television news was directly associated with levels of news exposure ($X^2 = 15.52$, $df = 4$, $p$ less than .01). Exactly half of respondents with the highest exposure levels in the sample rated the news as "important," in contrast to the 20.0 percent of the least frequent viewers. In short, peo-

ple who felt TV news was important watched more of it. The subjective meaning of "importance" is taken up below.

*Audience Attentiveness to Newscasts*

Once an individual has decided which newscast to watch, and has turned the TV set on, how much attention doshas to the news program? Albany County respondents were asked: "When you watch the news on television, do you sometimes do something else, like eat dinner, work, read or things like that?" Multiple responses were allowed, although respondents were not asked to specify which distracting activities, if any, they engaged in during a given program.

One quarter reported no other activity while they were watching the news (Table 3). Only one distracting behavior was mentioned by more than a quarter of the sample, "eating dinner" (the 6 p.m. news audience is the largest of the three).

TABLE 3

*Viewer Activities while Watching TV News*

| Activity | Percent Mentioning |
|---|---|
| Eating dinner | 41.2 |
| Reading newspaper, books, etc. | 25.8 |
| Talking to people in room | 23.3 |
| Snacking, drinking | 22.5 |
| Working in kitchen | 19.6 |
| Sewing | 17.1 |
| Caring for children | 15.0 |
| Doing Housework | 14.2 |
| Preparing for bed | 9.6 |
| Miscellaneous | 5.0 |
| No other activity | 24.2 |

(N = 240)

Note: Multiple responses allowed.

Of course, not all such behaviors are equally distracting.[19] Some, such as "eating dinner" or "sewing," allow almost complete attention to the program, while others, such as "reading" or "caring for children" do not.

Claiming to be completely attentive to the news was not significantly associated with a respondent's sex, age or frequency of viewing. It was, however, inversely associated with respondent education ($X^2 = 8.74$, df = 3, $p$ less than .05). More than one-third (35.5 percent) of respondents without a high school diploma, for example, mentioned no distracting behavior, compared to only one-quarter (25.5 percent) of respondents who had graduated from high school.

Asked if they generally watched the entire newscast, 70.4 percent of all respondents said they did. Men and women did not differ significantly in this matter, nor was education significantly a factor. Older members of the TV news audience, however, were more likely to watch the entire program than were middle-aged or younger viewers (85.7 percent of respondents 55 or older, compared to 65.5 percent of those under 35 and 68.9 percent of those 35 to 54 ($X^2 = 6.96$, df = 2, $p$ less than .05).

Additionally, qualitative evidence gathered during focus group sessions suggests that even seemingly distracted viewers may be selectively monitoring the broadcasts. There is, after all, no reason save the vanity of the broadcast journalists and the self-interest of advertisers why members of the audience *should* give their undivided attention to the news program. Viewers may watch TV news for a variety of reasons, but few of those reasons require total attention. It may well be sufficient for people to selectively monitor the broadcast, listening only for items which are important to them or which catch their attention.

### *The Uses and Gratifications of TV News*

A major purpose of the study was to examine the uses and gratifications associated with news-watching. Five uses and gratifications dimensions with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 were produced when viewer responses to the 40 uses and gratifications propositions were factor analyzed.[19] Each dimension contains unique elements of the audience experience, and, as a structure, the five

dimensions strongly suggest that many people who watch TV news are aware of what the newscasts have to offer and how what they see and hear fits into their lives.

The first uses and gratifications dimension has been labeled Surveillance-Reassurance.[20] This dimension combines several different types of substantively related statements[21] which, together show, first, that individuals use television news to keep track of external actors and events, and, second, that audiences do not desire information in the abstract but rather want information which is relevant to their psychological and social concerns. More than half of the Albany County respondents said, for example, they watched TV news to find out how questions of public policy were decided (Table 4, Statement 4), and more than one-third said watching TV news kept them from being surprised by higher prices (Statement 2). Moreover, almost three-quarters of all viewers said television neas was useful in keeping up with things that happened to people like themselves (Statement 9)—an indication that for many members of the TV news audience some parts of the program are highly salient to their day-to-day interests and experiences.

The comments of a 31-year old accountant who works for New York state are illustrative.

> What am I looking for? Well, the local news, I'm looking for state events that might affect me and my job, other people that I might know. . . . And the national and international news, things are changing on a daily basis, and it only takes one little thing for it to have a large impact.

A more concise illustration of using TV news for surveillance might be difficult to find. This respondent, like many other viewers, watched TV news to be informed about his own subjective interests. He knew what he wanted and believed TV news could provide it.

While some viewers used TV news to survey the external environment, many watched to be reassured that the world, both near and far, was safe, secure, and that despite the crisis nature of many news items, it demanded no immediate action on their part. Nearly three out of ten viewers said they felt more secure and reassured after watching the news (Statement 6); one viewer in five said television news viewing helped them forget their own problems (Statement 3), and sixty percent of respondents said watching TV news made them realize that their own lives were not so bad after all (Statement 1).

TABLE 4

Respondent Support for Uses

and Gratifications Statements

| | Strongly Agree % | Agree % | Un-decided % | Disagree % | Strongly Disagree % | (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SURVEILLANCE-REASSURANCE | | | | | | |
| 1. TV news makes me realize that my life is not so bad after all. | 10.5 | 50.4 | 19.3 | 16.8 | 2.9 | (238) |
| 2. I watch TV news so I won't be surprised by higher prices and things like that. | 5.4 | 31.8 | 14.2 | 41.0 | 7.5 | (239) |
| 3. TV news helps me forget about my own problems. | 4.6 | 15.8 | 9.6 | 52.1 | 17.9 | (240) |
| 4. TV news lets me see how big issues are finally worked out. | 10.0 | 46.7 | 18.8 | 20.8 | 3.7 | (240) |
| 5. I watch TV news because I like to get the news first so I can pass it on to other people. | 7.5 | 25.8 | 12.5 | 44.2 | 10.0 | (240) |
| 6. Somehow I feel more secure and reassured after I watch the news. | 5.4 | 23.8 | 24.3 | 38.5 | 7.9 | (239) |
| 7. Television shows you what the people in the news are really like. | 7.9 | 37.9 | 19.6 | 29.6 | 5.0 | (240) |
| 8. The newscasters are almost like friends you see every day. | 5.9 | 45.6 | 11.7 | 31.4 | 5.4 | (239) |
| 9. TV news helps me keep track of what is happening to people like myself | 23.8 | 49.0 | 8.4 | 15.1 | 3.8 | (239) |

TABLE 4, continued

| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Un-decided | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10. The TV camera can't lie, you see exactly what is happening. | 8.4 | 27.6 | 16.7 | 38.1 | 9.2 | (239) |
| 11. Television news helps me make up my mind about things. | 5.0 | 41.2 | 22.1 | 25.0 | 6.7 | (240) |
| 12. TV news often makes me feel like part of important or historic events. | 4.2 | 46.4 | 14.2 | 29.7 | 5.4 | (239) |
| 13. It's like having a good talk with your friends. | 7.5 | 28.5 | 16.3 | 39.7 | 7.9 | (239) |
| 14. It helps me understand some of the problems other people have. | 13.8 | 77.0 | 5.0 | 4.2 | 0.0 | (239) |
| 15. When the newscaster shows how he feels about the news, it helps me make up my mind about that news item. | 3.8 | 27.2 | 15.5 | 44.8 | 8.8 | (239) |
| 16. Watching TV news helps me keep an eye on the mistakes people in power make. | 12.9 | 49.2 | 15.4 | 17.9 | 4.6 | (240) |
| COGNITIVE ORIENTATION | | | | | | |
| 17. I sometimes see something on the TV news and then follow it up in more detail later. | 12.6 | 65.7 | 11.7 | 9.6 | 0.4 | (239) |
| 18. I like to compare my ideas to what the commentators say. | 28.0 | 52.3 | 7.9 | 8.4 | 3.3 | (239) |

TABLE 4, continued

| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Un-decided | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 19. Television news provides food for thought. | 16.2 | 66.7 | 9.6 | 6.3 | 1.2 | (240) |
| 20. Keeping up with the news on TV gives you plenty to talk about. | 7.9 | 56.9 | 14.2 | 20.1 | 0.8 | (239) |
| 21. TV news gives me more facts to back up my opinions. | 6.7 | 67.4 | 13.4 | 11.7 | 0.8 | (239) |
| 22. My friends and acquaintances expect me to keep up with the news on TV. | 2.5 | 19.7 | 12.6 | 55.5 | 9.7 | (238) |
| 23. Watching the TV news keeps me in touch with the world. | 30.4 | 58.7 | 4.6 | 6.3 | 0.0 | (240) |
| DISSATISFACTIONS | | | | | | |
| 24. TV news tries to make things seem more important than they really are. | 8.8 | 37.4 | 24.4 | 27.3 | 2.1 | (238) |
| 25. The TV news programs try to make things seem more dramatic than they really are. | 22.2 | 49.4 | 10.9 | 13.4 | 4.2 | (239) |
| 26. By the time I see the TV news at night, I have already read or heard about most of the headline items. | 24.5 | 51.5 | 2.5 | 15.6 | 5.9 | (237) |
| 27. Watching TV news is important, but I wonder if it makes any difference if I watch it or not. | 11.3 | 28.2 | 21.8 | 22.7 | 16.0 | (238) |
| 28. The newscasters do not give enough background information to understand what is going on in the news. | 11.7 | 50.2 | 9.6 | 23.4 | 5.0 | (239) |

TABLE 4, continued

| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Un-decided | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AFFECTIVE ORIENTATION | | | | | | |
| 29. After a hard day, watching the TV news helps me relax. | 16.3 | 46.9 | 8.4 | 22.6 | 5.9 | (239) |
| 30. Watching the TV news at night makes me feel sleepy. | 5.6 | 37.2 | 7.1 | 32.1 | 17.9 | (196) |
| 31. I feel sorry for the newscasters when they make mistakes. | 13.8 | 37.2 | 11.7 | 23.0 | 14.2 | (239) |
| 32. The television news is sometimes very exciting. | 18.8 | 60.4 | 6.3 | 13.3 | 1.2 | (240) |
| 33. They shouldn't show really unpleasant things on the news, because there is nothing we can do about them. | 4.2 | 18.0 | 9.6 | 52.7 | 15.5 | (239) |
| DIVERSION | | | | | | |
| 34. When the newscasters joke around with each other, it makes the news easier to take. | 27.2 | 39.3 | 9.6 | 15.5 | 8.4 | (239) |
| 35. Television news can be very funny at times. | 10.5 | 64.4 | 10.5 | 14.6 | 0.0 | (239) |
| 36. TV news satisfies my sense of curiosity. | 5.9 | 56.9 | 15.5 | 20.9 | 0.8 | (239) |
| 37. I enjoy hearing funny, different, or strange things on the news. | 19.7 | 69.0 | 7.9 | 3.3 | 0.0 | (239) |
| 38. There is always something different on the TV news. | 8.4 | 55.6 | 9.6 | 23.8 | 2.5 | (239) |

TABLE 4, continued

| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Un-decided | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 39. I like hearing the voices of the newscasters in my house. | 6.3 | 41.2 | 23.7 | 20.4 | 8.3 | (240) |
| 40. TV news programs tell me about the main events of the day. | 19.6 | 71.7 | 3.7 | 5.0 | 0.0 | (240) |

Viewers were reassured by both news content and news format. More than half of the Albany respondents agreed that "the newscasters are almost like friends you see every day" (Statement 8). The key element in this proposition appears to be the notion of the newscasters-as-friend, a para-social relationship of trust and respect, of "intimacy-at-a-distance."[22]

Just how real this "friendship" was for some viewers can be seen in the following data. People who watched the network news were asked: "Do you happen to remember how you felt when [the anchorman watched] was on vacation last summer?" Three respondents in ten (31.7 percent) said they did not remember or did not notice the anchorman's absence. But more than twice as many (68.3 percent) did recall that their newscaster "friend" was not there, and one-quarter of those who missed network newscasters said they had been "upset."

However, having a para-social relationship with the network anchorman did not necessarily extend to less prominent network reporters or to people on the local anchordesk. When people who watched the network news were asked to name one or more of their "favorite" network correspondents, only 19.6 percent named a single "favorite," and fewer than one respondent in 20 (4.5 percent) named more than one.

When viewers were asked to name the local anchorman on the program they watched, the best-known, who had appeared on Albany television for 25 years, was correctly identified by 69 percent of his audience. The least well-known anchorman, a relatively newcomer of only two years, was named by only 38 percent of his audience. The third was correctly identified by 51 percent of his audience, reflecting nearly six years of local broadcast exposure.

In general, the only characteristic which distinguished viewers who took newscasters as parasocial "friends" from those who did not was how much TV news they watched, and even these associations are not especially strong. Frequent viewers of network news were not more likely to be upset when the anchorman vacationed ($X^2 = 4.16$, $df = 2$, $p = .12$), but having a "favorite" network correspondent did increase directly with exposure ($X^2 = 19.17$, $df = 2$, $p$ less than .01). On the other hand, being able to name the anchorman correctly on the 6 p.m. news did not increase with higher rates of viewing.

In addition to this para-social interaction, there is yet another element in the TV news viewing experience which adds to its potentially reassuring qualities. When TV news viewers are asked why they watch the news, or why they watch a particular news program, they often responded, "habit." Probing frequently produced a response like the following, which was offered during one focused group:

> It's an enjoyable habit, sort of an enjoyable ritual, I think It sort of helps structure the day, puts an end to the afternoon. Let's say, dinner and then TV, the news, and the kids have to be gotten ready for bed. . . . So it [TV news] comes, it seems to come at a good time, really.

What this respondent, and many others, appear to be saying is that the most mundane activities of everyday life give order and stability to the individual's day. The act of watching television news each day at the same time and under the same circumstances provides an anchor-in-time, a reference point for other activities. Without pushing this point too far, one could argue that for some viewers, television news watching is one of many "rituals" which give them a sense of "place."

One final item in the Surveillance-Reassurance cluster requires comment. Statement 5 ("I watch TV news because I like to get the news first so I can pass it on to other people") may be tapping a kind of social utility, supplying what Simmel called "talk for the sake of talking."[29] Television news apparently provided some viewers with the raw materials for purely sociable "small talk." As a form of anticipatory communication, viewers sought out and remembered news items which they could use in their daily lives.

As one middle-aged bank teller explained:

> News is like an opener to talk to people that you're not familiar with. Like the weather. You can say, "Did you hear so and so." . . . You can pick something out of the news, and say, "Oh, wasn't that something," or "Didn't President Ford have a lot of nerve to do that."

About one-third of the respondents agreed with this proposition, although more than half did not. An analysis of the focused group transcripts shows that individuals share many different kinds of news with their families, friends and acquaintances. These shared items range from the most dramatic news (assassinations, moon landings and the like) to the most trivial (the weather, sports, movie reviews, etc.). Perhaps sharing news items reassures people by help-

ing to reinforce and reaffirm group values, attitudes and affiliations.

The second uses and gratifications dimension is called Cognitive Orientation and shows that people watch TV news not only to acquire information which is reassuring or socially useful, but also to gain information as part of the process of opinion-formation and opinion-holding. More than four out of every five viewers said, for example, that they compared their own opinions to those expressed by the TV commentators (Statement 18). Similarly large proportions agreed that television news gave them "food for thought" (Statement 19), kept them in touch with the world (Statement 23), or increased their store of facts, with which to back up their opinions (Statement 21). Only one viewer in five, however, said they watched TV news because their friends and acquaintances expected them to be informed (Statement 22).

Some people established, activated, tested, reinforced, or, occasionally, modified their opinions in response to the editorials of the TV commentators. Said one 71-year old viewer:

> I like [David] Brinkley for the angle that he has a thesis to give, and he generally pin points, or he "stabs" somebody, or he "stabs" your thoughts to get you thinking of what's going on.

For other viewers, news content itself was provocative. A 38-year old housewife put it this way:

> I talk back, for example, when I'm annoyed at [President] Ford for vetoing something I think he should have passed [*sic*]. . . . I get extremely, highly irritated. And I turn to Bob and say something like, "Goddamn it," and so on and so forth.

Her annoyed response suggests that for her, and those viewers like her, TV news watching sometimes takes on a value-expressive function.[24] The 57 percent of respondents who watched the news with husband, wife and/or children feel free to voice their true feelings in a family setting in which such expressions are likely to be shared.

Finally, more than three-quarters of respondents agreed with Statement 17, which suggests that viewers select new items of interest, concern or utility to them, and then seek additional information about that "news" from other, perhaps more specialized or more permanent, communications channels. Some focus group participants said, for example, that watching TV news at night gave them a good idea of what news stories they wanted to read in

the next morning's newspaper. A few even said they follow up television news coverage with extensive library reading.

So far, two "positive" gratificational dimensions have been discussed. The third dimension, Dissatisfactions, raises their logical, if not empirical opposite,[25] reminding us that the audience experience with television news is not always useful and gratifying – that there is some annoyance, irritation or other "cost" built into viewing. Dissatisfactions arise both from negative viewer evaluations of the form of TV news and from negative judgments about its "real-world" importance.

As to form or style, more than 45 percent of the audience thought TV news programs try to make events seem more important than they actually are (Statement 24). And an even larger proportion, more than seven out of ten, felt TV news coverage is overly dramatic (Statement 25). However, some, often the same viewers, faulted the news for lack of in-depth coverage of stories they consider important. Five of eight viewers agreed with Statement 28 that TV news fails to give sufficient background for understanding complex public events, while three-quarters said they had read or heard the headlines before they tuned in to the news (Statement 26), implying that they found television news content repetitious or boring.

News watching as waste of time crops up with Statement 27. Almost three out of ten respondents agreed that watching TV news was important for good citizenship, but they also wondered what difference their viewing made to public policy outcomes. Said a 51-year old machine tool foreman:

> I might get up from the dinner table and go see what is on. A disaster or a calamity. But I wouldn't get up to see what [a political candidate] is talking about, or the district attorney, or . . . I wouldn't waste my time watching them, because it makes no difference. My opinion won't make any difference anyway.

With the fourth dimension, our discussion moves on to matters of affect. In the Affective Orientation dimension were clustered a number of propositions reporting a variety of viewer emotions or reactions to television news. Two items (Statements 29 and 30), for instance, indicate that despite the hard-edged reality of TV news content, watching the news may produce a calming, literally soporific, effect in some members of the audience. More than half of the respondents said that after a hard day, TV news helps them

relax, and almost as many viewers reported that TV news makes them sleepy.

But if TV news has a calming function for some, at times it also produces an opposite effect. More than three-quarters of respondents agreed that the news is "sometimes very exciting" (Statement 32).

One additional emotion is often reported by newswatchers. In response to Statement 31, half of the Albany County sample said they "feel sorry for newscasters' mistakes." This response expressed viewer empathy with the difficulties of familiar, if actually remote, others, the newscasters. When a piece of news film breaks, or a "remote switch" fails, the anchorman is faced with a momentary embarrassment. Some viewers sense this and feel sorry for the newsman, who, as shown above (Statement 8), is like a friend they see every day.

The final uses and gratifications dimension – Diversion – consists of two interrelated aspects. The first points up the ability of TV news content to provide some viewers with an opportunity for affective expression, often in response to the highly stylized banter between newscasters called "happy talk" news. Five of eight Albany viewers agreed that the newscasters' jokes "make the news easier to take" (Statement 34). Explained a retired gas station owner:

> There's a comfortable atmosphere. . . . And I like that part of the program, because it's lighter. There's enough seriousness. . . . There's some quibbling back and forth, between them [the newsmen] which is very funny.

However, not all viewers found this cross-talk enjoyable. Some, particularly better-educated viewers, believed it was a waste of time and demeaned the news. Other viewers disliked it for a different reason. As one 29-year old telephone switchboard operator complained:

> It means nothing really to us. And it's sort of silly. Like you're fooling around, joking with your friends. Well, maybe that isn't funny to somebody else.

Her complaint suggests that she felt slighted, perhaps offended, at being left out of an inside joke being told by her newscaster "friends."

Also among the defining propositions of the Diversion dimension are four measures which emphasize viewer appreciation of novelty and the unexpected, that is, diversion in its truest sense – temporary

escape from the constraints of boredom and routine. Respondents almost unanimously enjoyed hearing "funny, different, strange news" (Statement 37). Three-quarters agreed that TV news brought them the novelty of the day's main events (Statement 40). An equal proportion subscribed to Statement 38 ("There is always something different on the TV news"), and as many concurred that TV news "satisfies my sense of curiosity" (Statement 60).

This diversion function was neatly expressed in the comments of a 37-year old dentist, who said:

> It's fun. It's mostly entertainment, though. You see famous people. You see horrible events. You see great things happening. Personalities.

That viewers considered TV news to be entertaining is an important finding, for previous research has generally classified media content as either "fantasy-escapist," by which is meant entertainment programming, or "informational-educational," which is understood to be news and public affairs programming. The Diversion dimension reminds us that the same media content, in this instance television news, may serve both functions simultaneously.

## *Conclusions and Implications for Broadcast Journalism*

What, then, is the audience experience with television news? First and foremost, it is an experience which many people, but by no means all, perceive as generally useful and gratifying. For many viewers, television news informs – or at least, they believe it does. Broadcast news is not the sole source of information for most people, but it is certainly important. Viewers watch the news with varying degrees of interest and attention, finding its content sometimes salient and sometimes irrelevant, sometimes useful and sometimes incomprehensible.

News-watching also provides an opportunity for some audience members to exercise their critical capacities, testing their perceptions and attitudes on "fresh" events and personalities. For some, daily exposure to the news also supplies raw materials for sociability – pre-packaged tid-bits of information or opinion.

Through its symbolic content, highly stylized mode of presentation, and its periodic occurrence, television news also reassures while it informs. News-watching permits a vicarious participation

in on-going history. But, for most viewers, it is participation at a distance, participation in a filtered and sanitized "reality" made safe by the familiar presence of the celebrity-news-reader.

Many people also find that television news entertains while it informs and reassures. Like situation comedies and detective shows, the newscasts offer temporary release from the pressing cares of daily existence. Many better educated viewers object, on occasion, to stylistic excesses. In general, though, the television news audience feels positively toward what it sees, believing the newsmen and newscasts to be credible, informative and (somehow) important.

Many viewers are "actively" oriented to the news. They consciously choose between competing newscasts, arrange their schedules to be near a television set at news time, and pay close, albeit selective, attention to the program. Not all viewers, of course, are so actively involved with the news. Many watch the news, because, like Mt. Everest, it is there.

How important is television news to those who watch? Family, friends, nation and a host of other non-media sources certainly provide gratifications which are far deeper and more valued. But news-watching does have its place among the individual's sources of need-satisfaction. Instances of high drama aside, television news on a daily basis offers many viewers an experience which, when absent, is missed.

Still, there is much about the audience experience with TV news which should trouble students and practitioners of broadcast journalism. When many people watch TV news because it entertains and reassures, when viewers use the news in place of sleeping potions, when viewer feelings about the anchorpeople count for more in building an audience than the quality of newscast they anchor, then something may be wrong with how TV news is done.

The findings presented in this monograph suggest one possible alternative. While viewers enjoy TV news which is funny, relaxing, and otherwise diverting, most also watch for the very serious business of learning what is happening in the world. Moreover, it should be recalled that well over half of the people surveyed complained that television news did not provide them with enough background on complicated and important issues.

There is no necessary contradiction here. The first set of findings is not a brief for mindless, insulting "junk food" news. Nor are the

findings on viewer dissatisfactions an argument to turn newscasts into an electronic version of a Brookings Institution seminar. But as a former TV critic for the Washington *Post* observed. "As they [the public] watch the news being dished up by young men and women who apparently learned how to use a hair-dryer before they mastered a typewriter, viewers apparently want something else."[26] Running through this monograph is a thread of that "something else." Most people who watch TV news are generally not all that caught up in news, but they are interested in news which explains and amplifies those events, issues and personalities that have or could have an impact on their own lives.

Television news need not be dull to be informative. But to be informative, broadcasters may well reconsider some of their most cherished traditions. Being a foreign correspondent may be glamorous and exciting, and being a Washington "insider" the high point of a journalist's career, but most people who watch television news are not usually interested in being either.

However, even the most distant events or complicated workings of government can be reported in a way which links them to the concerns of the audience. When considering an item for inclusion on the news, reporters, assignment editors and executive producers alike might step back for a moment from their unique vantage point and put themselves in the place of the audience.

Television newscasters often protest that limitations of time make it impossible for them to present more than "headlines with pictures." But, it is no diminuation of journalistic integrity to find out what the public wants to know and then to present it in an understandable, concise, and, yes, entertaining way. What the viewing audience needs to know is both a matter of journalistic judgment and of understanding how and why people watch TV news. Of course, different viewers will have different interests and orientations to the news. And television journalists owe a special obligation to those who rely most heavily on their medium. But all members of the viewing public would benefit from a careful re-evaluation of the journalistic enterprise, a re evaluation conducted with an appreciation for the audience experience.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Edith Efron, *The Newstwisters* (Los Angeles: Nash, 1971), Robert Cirino, *Power to Persuade 'Mass Media and the News* (New York. Bantam Books, 1974), Marvin Barrett, " 'The Trojan Horse'. News Consultants," in Marvin Barrett, ed., *Moments of Truth?* (New York. Crowell, 1975), pp. 89-112, Herbert I. Schiller, *The Mind Managers* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

2. See, for example, Edward J. Epstein, *News from Nowhere* (New York. Random House, 1973), George A. Steiner, *The People Look at Television* (New York: Knopf, 1963); John P. Robinson, "The Audience for National TV News Programs," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 35.403-05 (Fall, 1971); Robert T. Bower, *Television and the Public* (New York. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).

3. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "Some Reflections on Past and Future Research in Broadcasting," in Steiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 409-22.

4. Raymond A. Bauer, "The Audience," in Ithiel de Sola Pool and Wilbur Schramm, eds., *Handbook of Communication* (Chicago, Rand McNally, 1971), pp 141-52; Nan Lin, "Communication Effects. Review and Commentary," in Brent Ruben, ed., *Communication Yearbook I* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction-International Communication Association, 1977), pp. 55-72.

5. For an overview of the uses and gratifications approach, see Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, "Utilization of Mass Communication by the Individual," in Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz, eds., *The Uses of Mass Communication*. (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1974), pp. 19-31, and for an important critique, see David L. Swanson, "The Uses and Misuses of Uses and Gratifications," *Human Communication Research*, 3:214-21 (Spring 1977).

6. *County and City Data Book* (Washington, D.C.. Government Printing Office, 1972).

7. A.C Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Station Index. Albany-Schenectady-Troy, N.Y.*, November, 1975.

8. Denis McQuail, Jay Blumler and J.R. Brown, "The Television Audience: A Revised Perspective," in Denis McQuail, ed., *Sociology of Mass Communications* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1972), pp. 135-65.

9 Seymour Sudman, *Reducing the Costs of Surveys* (Chicago. Aldine, 1967). Although this method of cluster sampling with quota controls does not require interviewer "call-backs," it has been shown to be a highly reliable and efficient method, especially for small-scale, exploratory studies. Indeed, in this case, the characteristics of respondents surveyed mirrored the adult population of Albany County with considerable accuracy, except that persons 25 to 35 years old and persons with a college education were slightly overrepresented. For a complete discussion of sample bias, see Mark R. Levy, The Uses and Gratifications of Television News, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1977, pp. 223-26.

10. In fact, 53 percent of the people interviewed said they watched a local newscast at 6 p.m. "nearly every day," while 46 percent said they watched the network news and 38 percent tuned in to an 11 p.m. newscast with the same frequency One respondent in ten (11 percent) saw the 6 p.m. news only once a week or less

often, compared to 21 percent who watched the network news and 30 percent who viewed the 11 p.m. news only once a week or less.

11. For a rationale for this measure, see Jack Lyle, "Television in Daily Life. Patterns of Use," in E. Rubinstein, G. Comstock and J. Murray, eds., *Television and Social Behavior* Vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.. Government Printing Office, 1972), pp. 1-32.

12. Personal communication, Dr. Jay Blumler, University of Leeds, England.

13. R. J. Rummel, *Applied Factor Analysis* (Evanston, Ill.. Northwestern University Press, 1970).

14. See, for example, Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail, *Television in Politics. Its Uses and Influences* (Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 1969), William Mindak and Gerald Hursch, "Television Functions on the Assassination Weekend," in Bradley Greenberg and Edwin Parker, eds., *The Kennedy Assassination and the American Public. Social Communication in Crisis* (Stanford. Stanford University Press, 1965), pp. 130-41.

15. Leo Bogart, *The Age of Television,* 3rd edition (New York. Frederick Ungar, 1972), pp. 79-80, 111-14.

16. See, for example, Bruce Westley and Werner Severin, "A Profile of the Daily Newspaper Non reader," *Journalism Quarterly,* 41.45-50 (Spring 1964), Westley and Joseph Mobins, "A Closer Look at the Non Television Household," *Journal of Broadcasting,* 4.164 73 (Spring 1960), Richard F. Carter and Bradley Greenberg, "Newspapers or Television. Which Do You Believe?" *Journalism Quarterly,* 42.29 34 (Winter 1965), Harvey K. Jacobson, "Mass Media Believability. Study of Receiver Judgments," *Journalism Quarterly,* 46.20 8 (1969), and Vernon A. Stone, "Sources of Most News. Evidence and Inference," *Journal of Broadcasting,* 14:1-4 (Winter 1969-1970).

17. These findings are generally consistent with those reported by Bruce Westley and Werner Severin, "Some Correlates of Media Credibility," *Journalism Quarterly,* 41:325-35 (Summer 1964).

18. When respondents were asked directly if TV news was "important" to them, 83.7 percent said it was, while 18.8 percent said it was "a little important" and only 3.7 percent said TV news was "not at all important" to them.

19. A factor analysis using part of the data presented here is reported elsewhere, see Mark R. Levy, "Experiencing Television News," *Journal of Communication,* 27:112-17 (Autumn 1977).

20. Convergence required 25 iterations. Together the five factors explained 80.3 percent of the variance in the data. The Surveillance Reassurance dimension was significantly correlated with the Affective Orientation and Diversion dimensions, suggesting a shared cognitive aspect. Based on Cronbach's alpha, factor reliability ranged from .90 to .51. For a complete discussion of these findings, as well as the factor pattern and factor structure matrices, see Levy, *The Uses and Gratifications of Television News, op. cit.,* pp. 81-119. It should be noted that a Varimax solution using the same forty variables produced a factor structure virtually identical to the oblique solution.

21. Although a few uses and gratifications statements may seem more applicable to local news than network news, it is clear from the focused group discus

sions that audiences rarely distinguished between the two types of programs when talking about "the news."

22 Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction," *Psychiatry*, 19.215-29 (August 1956). Note. At the time of this study, all regularly appearing network and local anchorpersons seen in Albany County were men.

23 In "Sociability: An Example of Pure, Of Formal Sociology," in Kurt Wolff, ed., *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York. Free Press, 1964), pp. 40-57.

24 Daniel Katz, "The Functional Approach to the Study of Attitudes," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 24:163-204 (Summer 1960).

25 In fact, the Dissatisfactions dimension is uncorrelated with the remaining four gratifications dimensions, suggesting that Dissatisfactions are a relatively unique aspect of the audience experience with television news.

26 Sander Vanocur, "The Nightly News: Out of Touch with the Public," Washington *Post*, April 13, 1977, pp. B-1, B-10.